

To
LYDIA :
WHO
MADE THIS BOOK
POSSIBLE

DIALECTICS

THE LOGIC OF MARXISM,
AND ITS CRITICS — *AN*
ESSAY IN EXPLORATION

BY
T. A. JACKSON

"I beseech you, in the bowels of Christ—believe it possible
you may be mistaken!"—*Oliver Cromwell*

"Even a little humour is permissible if it be not overdone."
—*Fred Casey*.

"The slogan is not to flinch in the struggle."—*F. Engels*.

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PROLOGUE

THIS essay is an attempt to clear the ground for a better and fuller appreciation of that which gives Marxism its living unity—namely, the *Dialectical Materialist Method*. Its special feature is that it seeks to show what this method is by means of an examination of what it *did* in the hands of Marx and Engels. It considers the *Dialectical Materialist Method in action* in the theoretical practice of these its first elaborators, and following them (so far as falls within its purpose) that of their disciples, Lenin and Stalin.

No pretence is made that this essay is in any way final or authoritative. Very much to the contrary: it is in every respect an *essay*, a venture—an attempt at a provisional exploration of a field which no British Marxist has hitherto attempted on anything but a most perfunctory scale. It is therefore liable to all the faults and mischances necessarily attending such provisional essays. None the less it is—an attempt! If its demerits—whatever they may be—provoke others better qualified to cover the ground in a more worthy manner it will have more than served its purpose.

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This essay has been rendered necessary by two things. The first is the appalling state of Marxist studies in England, as evidenced by the quality of all but a very few of the works purporting to treat of Marx and Marxism which have appeared in Britain in recent years; the second is the fact of the existence of a cleavage in the Marxist camp represented by the conflict—carried at times to the pitch of actual combat in arms—between the Communists on the one side and the Social-Democrats and their allies upon the other.

No Marxist can view this conflict without concern : no Marxist who takes his Marxism seriously can treat it as a mere *personal* squabble, arising from "faults on both sides," which could be composed by the exercise of tact and patience. What is at stake in this conflict is the basic significance of Marxism itself, and upon such an issue no Marxist can do other than choose his side and help to fight the issue, theoretical and practical, to a finish. Full frankness is far more likely to produce union and agreement than any "diplomacy."

As long ago as April, 1920, Stalin spoke of this cleavage in Marxism in these words :

"There are two groups of Marxists. Both are working under the flag of Marxism and consider themselves genuine Marxists. Nevertheless they are far from being identical. More than that. A complete gulf divides them, for their respective methods of work are diametrically opposed to each other.

"The first group usually confines itself to the superficial recognition of Marxism—to solemnly proclaiming it. Unable or not willing to study *the essence* of Marxism, unable or not willing to apply it in practical life, it transforms the living revolutionary propositions of Marxism into dead, meaningless formulas. It bases its activities, not on experience, not on the results of practical work, but on quotations from Marx. It takes its guiding lines and directives not from an analysis of living reality, but from analogies and historical parallels. Discrepancy between word and deed—such is the principal disease from which this group suffers. . . . The name of this group is, in Russia, Menshevism ; in Europe, Opportunism.

"The second group, on the other hand, transfers the centre of gravity of the question from the superficial recognition of Marxism to its realisation, to its application in practical life. Indicating the path and means of realising Marxism for various situations, changing the path and means when the situation

changes—this is what this group concentrates on mainly. It takes its directives and its guiding lines not from historical analogies and parallels, but from the study of surrounding conditions. In its activities it relies not on quotations and aphorisms, but on practical experiences, testing every step it takes by experience, learning from its mistakes and teaching others to build a new life. This . . . explains why in the activities of this group there are no discrepancies between word and deed, and why the teachings of Marx fully preserve their living, revolutionary force. . . . The name of this group is Bolshevism—Communism.”
 —Stalin : *Lenin*, pp. 5-6.

Disregarding as irrelevant the objection that might be urged that Stalin, being a partisan in the dispute, is no more than any man “a judge in his own cause,” we affirm that the issue is ultimately as Stalin here states it.

“Marxism” is either a mere abstract opinion, having only an incidental connection with the practical realities of life and struggle—in which case there is no need for a “Marxist” to feel responsible for squaring his theory with his practice—or, alternatively, the Marxist world-conception is primarily a theory of action, one derived so intimately from the facts of life and struggle that he who declares himself a Marxist thereby takes upon himself the responsibility for *living* Marxism as well as preaching it.

But before Marxism can be *lived* it must be *understood*; before it can be wielded as a weapon it must be *grasped*. And in order that a grasp of the essential logic of Marxism may become widespread in Britain it is before all things necessary to clear away the whole fabric of misconceptions and misrepresentations which stand as a blanket-veil between the ordinary British worker and Marxist understanding.

Although there have been “Marxists” of sorts in

Britain since before the death of Marx, the working-class movement in Britain has never been consciously or purposefully Marxist. At best it has been *adulterated* by such "Marxism" as has been available, and this, the native-British "Marxism," has in turn, "like the dyer's hand," been "subdued to that it works in."

Nothing evidences this better than the quality of the literature produced by native British Marxists. Apart from a score of works, all of recent date, in which an attempt is made to elucidate current problems by the aid of Marxist theory, this native British Marxist literature consists almost wholly of works purporting to "explain" Marxist theory in the *abstract*, in terms suited to the (presumably *infantile* understanding of the plain man.

No objection is here raised to simplification *as such*. On the contrary, no work could be more useful than that of presenting Marxism in such a way as can easily be assimilated by the ordinary man. What calls for protest is the fact that those who in Britain set out to "simplify" Marx commonly begin by reducing him to a *simpleton*, and those who offer to "explain" him are as a rule primarily concerned only to *explain him away*.

We take the ground here that Marx and Engels (and this applies also to Lenin and Stalin) are their own best expounders : that to attempt to "simplify" that which they have already made as simple as it is humanly possible to make it, cannot fail to result in a distortion of their plain sense and a misrepresentation of their clearly-presented meaning. Not "simplification" but *amplification* and, above all, *application* is what Marxism needs in Britain.

As usually presented to the English-speaking world by its popular expositors, literary and oratorical, "Marxism" is a loosely aggregated bundle of separate and distinct "theories" which have no connection with each

other beyond the fortuitous fact that they all originated with the one man, Karl Marx. Resolved thus into a jumble of "theories" — of Value, of Capital, of Crises, of History, of Class-War, of Revolution, and so on — each theory being presented as quite separate and self-contained — Marxism becomes an Old Curiosity Shop in which political amateurs and literary *dilettanti* can rummage for decorative oddments, just as they rummage in the Calendonian Market for old china, pewter plates, and bawdy prints.

In this way it has become quite a tradition in Britain for men to pose as "Marxists" on the strength of wearing a "Marxist" feather in the hair, or fig leaf on their intellectual nakedness. Nobody laughs in Britain to hear of "Marxists" who are also Christians, Theosophists, Spiritualists, or even Thomists — men who contrive to divide their allegiance between Karl Marx and the Blessed Saint Thomas Aquinas, even as others, with equal solemnity, seek to effect a synthesis between the philosophies of Marxism and of the Herr Doktor Sigmund Freud.

This eclectic-opportunist trick of disrupting the living unity of Marxism into a rubbish-heap of incompatible fragments has in Britain received high academic approval. Here, for instance, are the words of the learned Professor of Political Science in the University of London :

"The essence of Marx's work lies not in any special economic doctrine so much as in the *spirit* by which this total accomplishment was performed. . . .

"Marxism as a social philosophy can be most usefully resolved into *four distinct parts*. It is first and foremost a *philosophy of history* . . . it is a *theory of social development* intended to guide the party of which he was a leader. Marx in the third place outlined a *tactic*. . . . He was, finally, an *economic theorist*.

"For Marx himself, of course, none of these aspects is properly separable from any other. They form a

logical whole, the unity of which he would have passionately defended. It is, however, possible to reject the validity of his economic system, while accepting the large outlines of his social theory."

—Professor H. J. Laski : *Communism*, pp. 22-26.

That this may fairly be taken as representative of what passes for "Marxism" in Britain is evidenced by the fact that Professor Laski has, without in any way modifying the opinion above cited, taken of late to calling himself a "Marxist." As such he has been welcomed with acclaim into the "Marxist" camp, even to the extent of being chosen as the chief speaker at the function organised by the (*Marxist*) National Council of Labour Colleges to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the death of Karl Marx.

Professor Laski exhibits, in the quotation given above, a characteristic common to the whole British school of "explainers" of Marx. *He takes it calmly for granted that he understands Marxism far better than Marx understood it himself!* Marx he argues, would have "defended passionately" the logical unity of his theoretical system. But herein, according to Professor Laski, Karl Marx was self deluded. Marxism, he affirms, can be "separated" into parts capable of being considered in complete isolation. So, we might retort, is Professor Laski capable of being "separated" from his head, his lights, or his liver ! But in that case he would cease to be Professor Laski. And in like manner a Marxism disrupted is not Marxism, but a mangled corpse.

Professor Laski, however, sins in thoroughly respectable company. Here is a choice specimen of what has passed in Britain for a critical evaluation of Marxist doctrine :

"There are two remarkable inconsistencies between the general sociological position taken up by Marx and Engels and their persistent assertion of the economic basis of history. . . . In the first place they agreed that . . . 'the whole world, natural, historical,

intellectual, is represented as a process, i.e., as in constant motion, change, transformation, development.' If that be true, is it conceivable that every department of life—'natural, historical, intellectual' (by the way, a very slipshod division)—is *chained* to economics and cannot attain an independent development and existence of its own? In the second place, Marx's insistence that each epoch has its own characteristic law of development is inconsistent with the assertion that economic considerations are the prime movers in historic evolution."—J. Ramsay MacDonald: *Socialism and Society*, p. 42.

This passage, so sublime in its owlish stupidity, so ludicrous in its spurious profundity, is truly characteristic of Ramsay MacDonald; but, as is apparent from its family likeness to the quotation from Professor Laski, it is none the less characteristic of the whole "British" school of Marxian interpretation.

That MacDonald, of all men living or dead, should accuse *anybody* (let alone Engels!) of "slipshod" thought or speech is MacDonaldite *in excelsis*. It should not, however, prevent us from noting that in failing to perceive any reason for the allocation of the phenomena of universal development into just those departments—of Nature, of History, and of the Thought-process in itself—MacDonald follows the fashion of his school in treating as of no account the fundamental dialectical *method* whereby the conclusions of Marx and Engels were reached.

Similarly MacDonald, faced with an affirmation that the entire universe is in constant *movement*, finds a "contradiction" between that affirmation and the assertion that history has an "economic basis." Why? Because this latter assertion, to MacDonald (and his school), means that "every department of life" (who said "slipshod"?) "is *chained* to economics."

Since to Marx the term "economics" denotes a *movement*—"the sum and total of human productive activity" ✓